DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 398 593 CS 215 448

AUTHOR Kosidowski, Paul
TITLE Building a Foundation: Architecture Education and Writing Pedagogy.
PUB DATE 28 Mar 96
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Architectural Education; Class Activities; *Classroom Environment; Higher Education; Student Needs; *Writing Across the Curriculum; *Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS *Design Notebooks; University of Wisconsin Milwaukee; Writing Contexts; *Writing Thinking Relationship; Writing to Learn

ABSTRACT

An architecture design studio classroom is a community. The myth of the solitary student is destroyed by the very structure of the classroom: students can use the room at any time, students share their works-in-progress and final products with the class, and the class is a congenial and informal mix of discussion, comments, critiques, and encouragement. It is where architects learn to think like architects. For an instructor who spent 2 years as a writing across the curriculum (WAC) consultant at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's School of Architecture, this studio was the most important place for writing in architecture education. Studios are "visual" but not wordless. A typical sketchbook--which every student keeps--helps students visualize ideas, but the addition of a design notebook can make the design process explicit and tangible for students, and allow them the space to develop their own creative sensibility. A directed design notebook asks students to take risks and question their process, since there are few models to show students of an architect thinking through writing. The structure and atmosphere of the studio classroom makes it a fertile place for a writing-to-learn activity. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Building A Foundation: Architecture Education and Writing Pedagogy

Paul Kowalewski, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Roundtable: Reports from the Field: New Perspectives on Writing from Across the Curriculum
CCCC Convention, March 28, 1996, 1:40 p.m.

ED 398 693

To begin, I'd like to take you to a classroom I've been spending a lot of time in lately. This class meets for 3 to 4 hours a day, three days a week. The time is specified, but more often than not, the class gathers and disperses haphazardly. There are 10-12 students and an instructor. Students have their own desks--complete work areas, really--and this is where they do most of their work during the semester. The building is open 24 hours, and students can use their work areas at any time, and they often do. When the class is in session, the atmosphere is casual and relaxed. The instructor will often begin with a short talk on a specific problem or issue pertinent to the students' current work, and then the class will become a congenial and informal mix of discussion, comments, critiques and encouragement. Sometimes, a one-on-one conference will mushroom, eventually including the entire class. Students will often be called on to share their work in progress to the entire class, and several times each semester, the students will be called upon to present their finished work, which is examined, analyzed and critiqued by the entire group. At the end of the semester, several students will present their work to other classes in a large informal assembly, complete with snacks and guests from outside the college.

You can imagine the implications and potential if such a class were a writing class: the atmosphere is one of a community of writers, the myth of the solitary author is destroyed by the very structure of the classroom, the intense and anxiety provoking idea of sharing work is normalized from the very beginning.

But, of course this classroom is not a writing classroom (at least not one I have ever seen before). It is, however, a *real*, architecture studio classroom, a typical example of the classrooms that are the core of architecture education in the North America. It is where almost everyone who has become an architect *learns* to be one. It is where the real work of architecture education happens. It is where architects learn their most essential skills: drawing, modeling, and most of all, designing. It is where architects learn to think like architects.

It is also a place where there are no word processors, no texts, no papers--very few written words at all.

CS215448

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Any studio teacher will tell you the reason: "An architect must learn to think visually." "We don't write, we draw, model and sketch." And of course, "We're designing 3 buildings a semester here, we *don't have time* to write. After all, this isn't *an English* department." But after spending almost two years as a WAC consultant to the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, I'm convinced that this is the most important place for writing in architecture education. And, as I'm finding, it is the place of most resistance as well.

When I began my work here, people were eager to involve me in classrooms that already had a writing activity. And others asked me to help add a written project to their syllabus. The administration was interested, after all, in improving the writing of their students after a recent accreditation report had given the school low marks here. The Dean and Department chair were eager and energetic. There were several fruitful collaborations, but almost every one began with, "My students can't write! Please help them."

Eventually, as I was able to expand my role. In some classes we found that free-writing exercises were a great way for students to become tuned in to the specifics of their environment. A new field of architecture studies called Environmental and Behavioral Studies--a field that sees architecture as more the study of interactions between people and places--is a natural fit for an activity that forces students to observe and record an environment in detail, and finally edit and analyze their observations. The ideas spread, the word-of-mouth was good, and WAC became to be a real presence in the school.

But it was a full year before someone suggested that I look into working in the design studios. And it's not hard to understand why. Studios are both the core of the curriculum and the sanctum sanctorum of the profession, a place where outsiders are least welcome. The studio instructor is more mentor than professor, and the classroom relationships are intense and personal. My first step in this process was observing a studio project from start to finish--and I was welcome there. But it was clearly not a place in which an outsider might have a say about how the class might be run. However, my observations and discussions with students and faculty suggested that this was an important place for writing to meet architecture.

Obviously, studios are "visual" but not wordless. There is discussion and critique,

presentation and explanation. Several times a semester, students are called on to present their work. A student will pin several sketches and drawings up on the wall, and for 20 minutes or so, describe what she has done, what she was getting at in a design--describe the intricacies of the design itself and the design process. And she will likely do this without an outline, note cards or any written material at all. In fact, producing a single-page abstract of their presentation, which some studio instructors have begun to require, is look on as a major undertaking. The precision and clarity necessary to such an abstract is important to the graphics of a project, but not to words.

But writing in the studio has an even more important function than this. A notebook can expand the very creative space in which students work. As with that of any creative discipline, the teaching of architecture involves a contradictory tension between methods and creativity, rules and individuality. Instructors often begin a class by describing a design technique--always with the caveat, "This is how *I* do it, you might choose to approach it another way." The students must carve out their own individual, creative identities within the rules and acceptable practices of the discipline. And of course, the *most* celebrated work is that which is "fresh" or "original," work that pushes the limits or bends the rules. Students are urged to find their own path, yet there is little space or structure in which to develop his or her own sense of style or approach. Instead, this individuation is assumed to be a sort of mystical, osmosis-driven process.

So while typical sketchbook--which every studio student keeps--helps students visualize ideas, or even "practice" for their finished drawings, a design notebook--driven by classroom prompts and short assignments--can make the design *process* explicit and tangible for students, and allow them the space to develop their own creative sensibility. For example, consider these prompts:

> *Think of a design decision you made in the last week that you can't really defend logically or functionally--a decision that just seemed instinctively "right." Your client stops by and asks you why you did it that way. Write a half page in your design notebook explaining your decision.*

> *According to the design program, the institute you're building should "impart a sense of purpose and modesty." Think about a building you know that might called "modest." In your notebook, describe what makes it so. Use sketches to illustrate your ideas.*

This refocusing on process is particularly valuable within the culture of architecture, where extreme competitiveness and investment in the idea of "natural talent" create an atmosphere where gatekeeping is sometimes valued over learning. (For example, more than one professor has said, "I suggest design notebooks at the beginning of the semester. The best students keep them, most students don't" the implication being that this is typical and inevitable.) With attention focused on grades and advancing in the program, students focus on producing the product *they think* the instructor wants. There is little space to take risks and then step back and evaluate those risks. There is little space for questioning one's process. A directed design notebook asks students to take risks, question their process, see through different eyes, define and redefine the principles behind a design. A place to fill in the experiences and details that a sketch cannot capture, a place to think like an architect.

Unfortunately, architecture as a field doesn't really want to admit that it questions things or changes its mind too often. Architectural writing is rich, but often polemical and didactic. There are few models to show students of an architect thinking through writing. The published notebooks of the legendary Louis I. Kahn, for example, show the process of drawings. ("The architect starts with a blank piece of paper upon which he imprints the gradual steps in the development of something he wants to make exist," he writes.) The writing, however, is full of statements like, "Nature does not know how beautiful the sunset is." A fine statement, but not useful to ease the performance anxiety of a young writer. The only useful models I have found are the published sketchbooks of LeCorbusier and the unpublished notebooks of a junior professor at UWM. LeCorbusier's notebooks are a mammoth collection of everything from political diatribes to grocery lists. But they do show how a notebook might become an integral part of an architect's intellectual and creative life (Leonardo DaVinci's notebooks are useful in this way as well, even though they are mostly concerned with science rather than design.)

James Wasley of the architecture department here, uses examples from his notebooks to introduce his studio to the idea of writing as thinking and learning. These are generally records of observed places, but in the combination of sketches and text, they show how

one can compliment another, how they combine to capture the experience of a place. In this page about a Venetian palace, he describes his experience of entering the room, and how he did not appreciate the symmetry of the design at first—a subjective experience that no drawing or sketch could capture.

So there are some models and examples, but shaping the direction of these studios will nonetheless be a difficult and slow process. We are working slowly, introducing ideas in casual individual discussions, rather than conducting a "workshop" that attempts some sort of mass conversion. I have been interviewing students, practicing architects, and faculty about the design process and the different roles a design notebook might take in the classroom and in the design process. The structure and atmosphere of the studio classroom makes it a fertile place for a writing-to-learn activity like this. And, as I hope I have described, the potential rewards for both student and teacher are great.

WORKS CITED

Kahn, Louis I. *Notebooks and Drawings*. Edited and designed by Richard Saul Wurman and Eugene Feldman. Philadelphia: Falcon Press, 1962.

Le Corbusier. *Le Corbusier Sketchbooks*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1981.

Leonardo da Vinci. *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*. Edited and trans. Jean Paul Richter. New York: Dover, 1970.